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ABSTRACT

A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly over a period of a semester or a school year. The student may write as much as he chooses on any topic, and the teacher responds, introduces new topics, offers observations, clarifies, and asks and answers questions. Teachers use dialogue journals to extend contact time with individual students, expand student participation, gain feedback about classroom issues, and promote language acquisition and writing development. Considerable teacher time is required to read and respond to student entries, but teachers have found ways to make the task manageable and productive. The journals can be used with all students, both native and non-native English-speakers, at differing levels of confidence and skills. Less literate students can begin by drawing pictures, and teachers can respond initially with pictures and a few words. Each student should have a bound and easily portable notebook used only for this purpose. The writing must be done regularly, in or out of class, with the frequency determined by the student's and teacher's needs. Initially, the teacher may determine a minimum entry and should ensure confidentiality. Both teacher and student should be expected to be good conversationalists and interesting writers and to enjoy the task. (MSE)

DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING WITH LIMITED-ENGLISH-PROFICIENT (LEP) STUDENTS. Q & A

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Q&A

Dialogue Journal Writing with Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) Students

Prepared by Joy Kreeft Peyton

April, 1987

All teachers would like to have more time to communicate with their students, to learn about their backgrounds, interests and needs. The need to communicate is intensified with students learning English as a second language (ESL). At a minimum, they bring to school a different language and cultural background. They may also be non-literate in their native language, have had little or no schooling in their own countries, and possibly have suffered considerable trauma as they left their country to come to the United States. If they are new arrivals to the United States, they are adjusting to an entirely new way of life as they learn the language and begin to function in school. It is with these students that communication, on a one-to-one basis, is crucial--not only to help them adjust, but to help the teacher understand them and address their special needs.

Many teachers of such students--both in the mainstream and ESL classroom--have found "dialogue journals," interactive writing on an individual basis, to be a crucial part of their teaching. Dialogue journals not only open a channel of communication not previously possible, but they also provide a context for language and writing development. Students have the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening atmosphere, in interaction with a proficient English speaker. Because the interaction is written, it allows students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing that are done in school.

What Is A Dialogue Journal?

A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly--daily, if possible, or at least two or three times a week--over a period of one semester or an entire school year. Students may write as much as they choose on any topic and the teacher writes back regularly to each student (each time they write, if possible)--often responding to the student's topics, but also introducing new topics; making comments and offering observations and opinions; requesting and giving clarification; asking questions and answering student questions. The teacher's role is as a participant *with* the student in an ongoing, written conversation, rather than as an evaluator who corrects or comments on the writing.

The following examples, excerpted from the dialogue journal entries of two sixth graders from El Salvador and the Philippines in a mainstream class of LEP students, illustrate the nature of the writing:

March 17

Claudia: *The new teacher or helper in our class is very good. I like her, don't you like her? Today she helped me and us a lot. But Tony didn't want help. Why doesn't Tony want us to help him?*

I will try & bring my lunch every day from now on because the turkey stew & other lunches put me sick. I hate them. When I am very hungry I have to eat them but when I get to my house my stomach hurts & I am sick for 3 days. Can't the teachers protest or say something about the food that they give here?

What do you feed chickens here? We have a hen that layd an egg.

Teacher: *The lunches are not that bad! I've eaten them sometimes. You are wise to bring your own lunch. That is usually what I do, too. You have such good food at home that nothing served here could taste so good!*

Tony is embarrassed. He wants help, but he does not want anyone to know that he needs it. Offer to help him and if he says "no" then leave him alone.

Chickens will eat scraps of bread, wheat, seeds, water and some insects.

March 18

Claudia: *but the hen has wat it looks like worms, do you know how to get the hen of her stomach sickness or is it usual for her to be like that because she is laying eggs and she could even lay 30 eggs so I do not know if it is usual or if it is a sickness of her.*

oh poor hen she cooks & cooks when I say pretty hen in a low low voice & she looks like she is used to children because she is cook & cooking when I say pretty things, oh she's so nice.

Teacher: *I've never heard of a hen having worms--but it is possible. Go to a pet shop or to a veterinarian and ask them. Who gave you the hen? Maybe they will know.*

We say that a hen clucks. It is a pleasant little sound as though they are happy. They cackle when they lay an egg! That is usually loud! Does your hen cackle?

I think hens like having people or other hens around, don't you?

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April 7

Ben: I got a chance to look at all those weird bones. They're weird because I usually see them with their skin, bones, and hair and with their eyes or eyeballs. Where did you get all of those bones? Did you got them from the desserts? I feel sorry for the turtles or the animals that lived in the deserts and got run over by those cruel men and women...I like and loved tamed animals.

Teacher: Yes, I've collected the bones, and my children, as they've grown up, have found and brought me bones because they know I like to use them in teaching. Have you looked at the teeth? Some come to a sharp point and some are very flat with ridges on the top. All animals die--and if their bones are uneaten the sun and wind and rain clean and dry them out. So many of those animals may have died a natural death.

Through dialogue journals, students write about topics that are important to them as they occur in their lives, and explore them in the written genre that is appropriate. They are not constrained by teacher- or curriculum-established topics or by a pre-set schedule of topics and genres that must be covered in sequence. Sometimes their concerns and interests are personal, as in Claudia's complaint about the food at school. Likewise, journal entries may relate to material covered in school, as in Ben's entry. At other times, activities and interests at home generate the opportunity for learning in the journal, as occurred through Claudia's discussion of her chickens. Students may write descriptions, explanations, narratives, complaints, or arguments with supporting details, as the topic and communicative purpose dictate. Entries may be as brief as a few sentences, or they may extend for several pages. Topics may be introduced briefly and dropped, or discussed and elaborated on by teacher and student together for several days.

Because the teacher is attempting above all to communicate with the student, his or her writing is roughly tuned to the student's language proficiency level. Just as they learn over time to adjust to each student's level of understanding in speech, teachers can easily become competent at varying their language in a dialogue journal to individual students to ensure comprehension (Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed and Morroy, 1984). For example, in the exchange below from the dialogue journal of a student in the early stages of learning English, the teacher uses relatively simple syntax and words the student knows or has used in her entry. The same teacher's entry to Ben, above, is linguistically much more complex.

Laura: Today I am so happy because yesterday my father sad he was going to by a new washengmashin [washing machine] then yesterday he came with a new car a beg new car is a Honda and she has the radio. Leticia like to talk abowt me yesterday she sad every thing abowt my diat to the boy I danth like that.

Teacher: How nice! A new car! What color is it? Did you take a ride in the new car?

I'm sure Leticia did not think when she told the boys about your diet! She is so thin she does not need to think about a diet so she does not understand how you feel. Tell her!

An essential characteristic of dialogue journal writing is the lack of overt error correction. The teacher has sufficient opportunities to correct errors on other assignments; thus, the dialogue journal is one place where students may write freely, without focusing on form. The teacher's response in the journal serves instead as a model of correct English usage in the context of the dialogue. The teacher can, however, take note of error patterns found in the journals and use them as the basis for later lessons in class. Sometimes the same structures that the student has attempted to use are modeled by the teacher and more details added, as in this example:

Michael: today morning you said this is my lovely friends right? She told me about book story name is "the lady first in the air." She tell me this lady was first in the air, and she is flying in the Pacific ocean, and she lose it everybody find her but they can't find it. They looked in the ocean still not here. Did she know everything of book?

Teacher: My lovely friend Mrs. P reads a lot. She has read the book about Amelia Earhart. It is a good story and it is a true story. They looked and looked but they never found her airplane or her. [Emphasis added.]

This example very clearly demonstrates teacher modeling. In most cases, such direct modeling of particular structures and vocabulary is neither possible nor desirable, for the journals would become stilted and unnatural. More often, modeling takes the form of correct English usage by the teacher, stated roughly at the student's level of ability, and related to something the student has written about, such as in the interchange with Laura cited above.

What Are The Benefits to Students and Teachers?

Many teachers, from early elementary grades through adult education, use dialogue journals to extend contact time with their students and to get to know them in a way that may not be possible otherwise. Through the medium of the journals, they may discuss the student's native culture and language, problems in adjusting to the new culture and to school rules and procedures, and personal and academic interests. This information not only builds strong personal ties, but also gives students individualized access to a competent, adult member of the new language and culture. Through this relationship the student has the opportunity to reflect on new experiences and emerging knowledge and to think through with an adult ideas, problems and important choices (Staton, 1984b).

There are also benefits related to the management of a classroom with students of varying language and ability levels. All students, no matter what their language proficiency level, can participate in the activity to some extent. In classes composed of students with a range of ability levels, or into which students newly-arrived from other countries are enrolled throughout the school year, dialogue journals afford the immediate opportunity of participation in an important class

activity. Since students' dialogue journal entries give continual feedback about what they understand in class as well as their language progress, the teacher receives information that leads to individualized instruction for each student, beginning through advanced.

Another major benefit has been observed in the areas of language acquisition and writing development. Dialogue journal interactions provide optimal conditions for language acquisition, both oral and written (Kreeft, 1984a, 1986; Staton, 1984a). For example, they focus on meaning rather than on form, and on real topics and issues of interest to the learner. The teacher's written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the learner's proficiency level; thus, the teacher's entries provide reading texts that may be even more complex and advanced than the student's assigned texts (Staton, 1986), but which are comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written. Beyond the modeling of language form and structure, the teacher's writing also provides continual exposure to the thought, style and manner of expression of a proficient English writer. As students continue to write, and read the teacher's writing, they develop confidence in their own ability to express themselves in writing. Teachers using dialogue journals report that their students' writing becomes more fluent, interesting, and correct over time, and that writing ability developed in dialogue journals transfers to other in-class writing as well (Hayes and Bahruth, 1985; Hayes, Bahruth and Kessler, 1986).

How Much Time Is Involved?

The single drawback of dialogue journals is the considerable teacher time required to read and respond to student entries. However, those teachers who have been successful with dialogue journals report that the time is well spent, for the knowledge they gain about students' interests and problems and the feedback they receive about the activities and lessons of the day serve as the basis for future planning. They have also found ways to make the process more manageable. For example, teachers with many classes and students (especially at the secondary level), sometimes choose to keep journals with only one or two classes, or have students write two or three times per week, rather than daily.

Can Dialogue Journals Be Used with All Students?

Yes. Dialogue journals were first used successfully with sixth grade students, both native and nonnative English speakers (Kreeft, et al., 1984; Staton, 1980; Staton, Shuy, Kreeft Peyton, and Reed, 1987). They are now being used with ESL students, from elementary grades through the university (Gutstein, Meloni, Harmatz, Kreeft and Batterman, 1983); with adult ESL students who are non- or semi-literate in their native languages (Hester, 1986); with migrant children and youths (Davis, 1983; Hayes and Bahruth, 1985; Hayes et al., 1986); with hearing-impaired children (Bailes, Searls, Slobodzian and Staton, 1986) and adults (Walworth, 1985); and with mentally handicapped teenagers and adults (Farley, 1986; Kreeft Peyton and Steinberg, 1985).

With non-literate students, there should be no initial pressure to write. Students can begin by drawing pictures, with the teacher drawing pictures in reply and perhaps writing a few words underneath or labeling the pictures. The move to letters and words can be made when students feel ready. At beginning levels, the interaction may be more valuable as a reading event, with more emphasis placed on reading the teacher's entry than on writing one. In classes where native language literacy is the focus, it is possible to conduct the dialogue journal interaction in the students' native language. The move to English can occur in line with course objectives or student readiness.

Dialogue journals need not be limited to language arts or ESL classes. In content classes--science, social studies, literature, and even math--they encourage reflection on and processing of concepts presented in class and in readings (Atwell, 1984), and because they bridge the gap between spoken and written language, they can be a way to promote abilities needed for composition (Kreeft, 1984b; Shuy, 1987).

How Do You Get Started?

- Each student should have a bound and easily portable notebook, used only for this purpose. Paperbound composition books that are large enough to allow sufficient writing and small enough for the teacher to carry home after class are best. A student may fill several notebooks during a term.
- The writing must be done regularly, but the frequency can be flexible, depending on the number of students in a class, the length of the class, the teacher's schedule, and the needs of the teacher and students.
- Most teachers prefer to give their students time to write during the class session. This time may be scheduled at the beginning of a class as a warm-up, at the end as a wind-down, or before or after a break as a transition time. Likewise, the teacher may allow the students to choose a time for making journal entries. Ten or fifteen minutes is usually adequate to read the teacher's entry and write a new one. Teachers usually respond outside class time.
- In the beginning stages, it seems desirable to set a minimum amount that students must write each time (such as three sentences), but the amount of writing beyond that should be up to each student. Students should understand, however, that long, polished pieces are not required.
- When introducing the idea of dialogue journals, the teacher should inform students that they will be participating in a continuing, private, written conversation, that they may write on any topic, and that the teacher will write back each time without correcting errors. The mechanics of when they will write, when the journals will be turned in, when they will be returned, etc., should be explained. When students are unable to think of something to write, the teacher might suggest one or two possible topics. It is important that everyone has something to write and that they feel comfortable with it.

- It is important that the teacher enter into the journal interaction as a good conversationalist and an interesting writer, and expect students to do the same. The goal is to be responsive to student topics and ask questions about them at times, but also to introduce topics and write about oneself and one's own interests and concerns. Teacher entries that simply echo what the student wrote or that ask a lot of questions (typical "teacher talk") can stifle rather than promote interaction.
- Finally, the teacher should relax and enjoy the writing! For many teachers, reading and writing in dialogue journals is the best part of the day--a wonderful time to reflect on the past day's work, to find out about the people with whom they are spending the semester or year, and to think about where their work together is taking them.

Resources

Dialogue, a newsletter about dialogue journal research and practice, is available from the Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR), Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037. Cost per year of a subscription to *Dialogue* is $6 for 3 issues. A volume of back issues, which contains newsletters from the past four years, a history of dialogue journals, a publications list, and abstracts of dissertations written about dialogue journals, is also available from CLEAR for $7. [Checks should be made payable to Handbook Press.]

The only teacher handbook available to date is *It's Your Turn Now: A Handbook for Teachers of Deaf Students*, by Cindy Bailes, Susan Searls, Jean Slobodzian and Jana Staton (1986). Write the Gallaudet Pre-College Outreach Program, Washington, DC 20002 for a copy.

A handbook for teachers of limited-English-proficient students will soon be available from CLEAR.

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